The Roots of Class Revolt

by ROBERT V. ANDELSON

PRESIDENT Kennedy, in a recent statement, spoke of the revolutionary heritage of the United States, and of our oneness with the revolutionary aspirations of other peoples. But the word "revolution" may mean many things, and our War for Independence had virtually nothing in common with the uprising associated with the names of Marat and Bakunin, Babeuf and Marx. On the one hand, impatience with mercantilist restrictions led to a demand for national autonomy. On the other, there occurred particularized eruptions of the international struggle of classes.

The year 1776 has a double significance in the annals of revolutionary history. For while our War for Independence was taking place, across the Atlantic the first revolutionary conspiracy was in process of organization. On May Day (May 1), 1776, Professor Adam Weishaupt of the Bavarian University of Ingolstadt formed a secret society which was to become the mother of all revolutionary organizations dedicated to class warfare in the modern era.

Known as the Order of the Illuminati, it claimed two thousand lodges just six years after its founding. In her scarce and revealing book, *World Revolution* (Constable, 1922), the British historian, Nesta H. Webster, traces the clandestine influence of the Illuminati — through the French revolution the Babeuvist Conspiracy, the Revolution of 1848, the First Internationale, Syndicalism and Bolshevism.

But although Mrs. Webster is able to demonstrate a fascinating linkage of persons and events, and indeed gives a convincing history of the world conspiracy, we must remember that conspiracies may precipitate revolution but can never really cause it. The underlying causes of revolution must be sought on a deeper level. A biological explanation is advanced by Lothrop Stoddard in *The Revolt Against Civilization* (Scribner's, 1923).

Dr. Stoddard, a Harvard-educated lawyer, holds that every society contains human elements which are, consciously or instinctively, its enemies because they are *uncivilizable*. Congenitally incapable of competing in a milieu of increasing complexity, they are psychologically predisposed to turn against a civilization which imposes upon them intellectual demands which they cannot meet and burdens of self-discipline too onerous for them to bear with equanimity.

The more civilized the society, the more restricted is the operation of the age-old process of natural selection which weeds out the weak and the degenerate. Instead they are preserved and their multiplication accelerated, while the race dies out at the top due to the low birth-rate which usually characterizes the successful. But although the number of incompetents increases ever-swiftly, their standard of living remains marginal and their social outlook bleak and hopeless. The spark of insurrection never issues from such as these; they are the dry tinder which conspiracy ignites.

Here indubitably is a compelling theory: that of the structural overleading of human stock, which, even as it declines in quality, is called

upon to support a burden which gets progressively heavier with every civilized advance.

Jack London's nightmarish picture of the East End and its denizens (*The People of the Abyss,* Macmillan, 1903) lends eloquent support to Stoddard's view. He speaks of them as "a short and stunted people, a deteriorated stock left to undergo still further deterioration; brutalized, degraded and dull." And he prophesies that "unable to render efficient service, made desperate as wild beasts are made desperate, they may become a menace and go 'swelling' down to the West End to return the 'slumming' the West End has done in the East."

But in searching out the causes of their debasement, he brings to light a factor overlooked by Stoddard. He quotes the following from the Reverend Stopford Brooke: "Their families had lived for a long time in the country, and managed, with the help of the common-land and their labor, to get on. But the time came when *the common was encroached upon,* and they were turned out. Where should they go? Of course, to London, where work was thought to be plentiful. But *the inexorable land question met them in London."* (Italics mine.) The only lodgings they could afford were in pestilential East End hell-holes, ridden with crime and vice. Broken by the inescapable sordidness of slum-life, and having nowhere else to go, they sank into a state of degradation and disease which was all the patrimony they had to confer upon their progeny.

Thus, in unearthing the roots of class revolt, we are brought in the last analysis to the dictum of Henry George: "The ownership of land is the great fundamental fact which ultimately determines the social, the political, and consequently the intellectual and moral condition of a people."

Canadian Economist Proposes L.V.T.

A shift of taxes to land as a move to spur construction in urban areas was discussed in a long article on the front page of The New York Times Real Estate section on August 6th. This familiar suggestion has pirouetted into prominence after having been proposed by Mary Rawson of Vancouver, British Columbia. Her monograph on "Property Taxation and Urban Development" published by the Urban Land Institute, 1200 Eighteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. is available on request at $4 a copy.

"The worst tax known in the civilized world"—the property tax on both land improvements—was said by Miss Rawson to be at cross purposes with urban development. "The tax on land, through its tendency to lower land prices, lowers the real cost of housing," she stated—"cities should recognize the 'schizophrenic nature of the property tax' and transfer levies on improvements to a comprehensive tax on the 'site value' of the land."

Henry George is mentioned as having originated this idea in the 19th century, but Miss Rawson contends that the controversy engendered by his single tax proposal has obscured objective studies ever since. She chides American land economists for having "turned their faces away from a consideration of the property tax as a factor in the problems and policies of urban land use....

"Nobody 'owns' land and nobody 'owns' buildings. They merely own an interest in land or buildings—from a legal point of view, an estate. It is people who pay taxes—land and buildings don't pay them," writes this Canadian land economist.